



What Can I Do with My Picky Eating Child?

Picky eating is common among toddlers and preschool children. Some children refuse to eat a few particular foods or only willing to eat certain foods. However, most of them grow out of the problem and eventually learn to eat a variety of foods.

Why are young children picky with food?

- ❖ Young children demand to make their own choice as their desire for autonomy is growing;
- ❖ Compare to babies, preschool children are less willing to accept new foods and taste vegetables; They may need repeated exposures before they take the first bite;
- ❖ Some children are sensitive to certain textures or flavours of food. They may reject textured food and stick to pureed or soft foods; or reject food with strong flavours;
- ❖ Some may have limited experience with food variety;
- ❖ When they are filled up too much milk or other junk foods, they will have little appetite for their meals.

What I can do for my picky eater?

As parents, there are a number of things you can do to help you and your toddler be able to enjoy food together. Remember, usually it cannot work with a single strategy.



- ♥ Provide breakfast, lunch and dinner and 2 to 3 snacks at regular times. Space the meals and snacks to 2 to 3 hours apart.
- ♥ Allow 10 to 15 minutes for your child to get prepared before mealtime. Ask your child to finish up the activity he is engaging in and clean up.
- ♥ Provide your child with choices in the meal:
 - ☆ Serve a new or less preferred food among some familiar or accepted food items. It takes the pressure away from you if he rejects the new food as he can fill up with the familiar foods.
 - ☆ Shop with your child. Offer him to choose his foods among a few appropriate food items. For example, “Which would you like for dinner, broccoli, spinach or pumpkin?”
 - ☆ Involve your child in preparing meals, e.g. washing the vegetables, stirring the food, and setting the table. This makes the meal more interesting and arouses anticipation.
 - ☆ Colourful dishes and foods cut into cute and funny shape are more attractive and appetite arousing.
 - ☆ Dips are effective to encourage children eating vegetables. Serve the vegetables with home prepared healthy dips, e.g. tomato puree, hummus, fruit puree or yogurt.
 - ☆ Prepare the food with different methods and into the textures your child accepts. For example, offer egg custard or fried eggs instead of a hard boiled egg; try crispy stir-fried veggie instead of soft steamed veggie.
 - ☆ Introducing new foods take time and patience. Present the food repeatedly, possibly up to 10 to 15 times, and be prepared that your child may spit it out before he accepts it eventually.
 - ☆ Eat with your child and invite him to taste the foods without forcing him. Let him explore them in ways he likes.

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♥ At mealtime:

- ☆ Sit together at the dining table and eat with your child. Let her feed herself. If she prefers eating with her fingers, do not insist that she uses a spoon. Once she is skillful, she will eat with the spoon.
- ☆ Remove distractions like toys, TV, and electronic devices during mealtimes. Try to make mealtime a fun and relaxing social time with conversations.
- ☆ Offer her small portions. Top up only if she wants more. An overwhelmingly large portion is a stress for children.
- ☆ You could talk about the colours of the foods but never make negative comments on foods.
- ☆ Praise her by describing what she does well. Children need recognition to learn what they do is right or correct.
- ☆ Reward her for eating the less preferred foods or vegetables with small non-food treats, e.g. cartoon stickers that she likes.
- ☆ Never reward her with desserts or processed snacks, e.g. chips, or chocolate.
- ☆ Never argue, scold, or punish her for not eating. This may lead to more eating problems.
- ☆ Most children have enough within 15 to 20 minutes in a meal. They do not have the attention span for a long meal. Let her get off the table when you observe that she is full.
- ☆ Lay down a reasonable mealtime rule with them of finishing a meal within 30 minutes or so. Take away the food if time limit is up.
- ☆ Avoid offering milk or other preferred foods immediately if she eats very little of her meal. It simply tells her the meal is not suitable for her. Instead you could offer her next snack earlier than the schedule.

Children take time to learn to accept new or non-preferred foods. Parents and caregivers need to be patient and consistent in actions among themselves to help picky eaters improve



Will my child get into nutrient deficiency?

- ❖ Your child will not have deficiency if he rejects a few foods. He will get the nutrients from other foods he eats.
- ❖ If you worry that picky eating compromise his growth and development, consider recording the foods and the quantity your child eats over a week. Remember, every bite counts. Then, review the following:
 - ☆ Was he offered a wide variety of foods? What were the foods and food groups that he ate over a week? Did he drink too much milk? Did he eat too frequently? Did he consume too much snack food, confectionaries or chips?
 - ☆ If he consumes foods from all the 5 food groups – grains, vegetables, fruits, meat or fish and eggs, and milk or milk products over a week, he has a nutritionally-balanced week.
 - ☆ Seek advice from your doctor or dietitian if your child constantly refuses foods of a particular food group as his nutritional status may be compromised.
- ❖ If your child is healthy and growing well, you don't need to worry. Keep offering him a variety of foods, eating with him and cultivate a relaxing and enjoyable mealtime. He will expand his preference as he grows.

My child does not eat leafy greens. Does it help by mixing it into the food he likes?

- ♥ This may work for some children. More commonly they will refuse eating the foods altogether as, in their eyes, their liked food is contaminated by something undesirable. Presenting the vegetables on the dining table within his reach repeatedly and having parents eating as a model are the most reliable ways to foster children's preference to vegetables.



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